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ABSTRACT

Historically, in sharp contrast with the United States, the Australian state systems of public education have always been extremely centralized and hierarchical in structure. While these highly centralized systems served the sparsely populated Australian states well during the early years of this century in providing universal free education and promoting equality of opportunity, many feel that this highly bureaucratized system has become obsolete. Yet only in the 1980s have any of the Australian state education systems undertaken efforts toward decentralization. The most potentially far-reaching efforts are currently underway in Victoria and Western Australia. In Victoria, however, the major efforts to restructure the educational system in 1983-84 to provide for greater local control have since given way to a "corporate management and efficiency movement" which is restoring strong central control. In Western Australia, moves toward devolution of power are more recent, and no specific structure has been proposed for school-based decision-making groups. Hence it is too early to tell whether the movement toward self-governing schools will be successful. Experience to date suggests, on the whole, that the movement toward self-government in Australian schools will be a long evolutionary process, in which reversals toward centralized control will be frequent. (TE)

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REVERSING PATTERNS OF CONTROL IN AUSTRALIA: CAN SCHOOLS BE SELF-GOVERNING?

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Historical Differences in Educational Control : US and Australia

Historically, in sharp contrast with the US, the Australian State systems of public education have been extremely centralized and hierarchical in structure. This fundamental difference has to be kept constantly in mind when trying to understand the current swing towards devolution of control to individual schools in the Australian public systems.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, elementary educational provision across the settled parts of Australia came from a mixture of Church, State and voluntary effort. Competition between the churches across the sparsely settled continent frequently resulted in under-utilised duplication of provision in some centres and a total absence of schools in others. In the latter centres, the State usually moved in and filled the void in provision by default.

The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed an on-going contestation for control of schooling between churches and State. To over-simplify, this culminated in separate legislation in each of the States[1] between 1872 - 1895, establishing their own Public Education Acts. Effectively, these similar though different Acts resulted in a single State-provided 'free compulsory and secular' public system for the Protestant majority in each State and a separate non-funded Catholic system for the minority.

Across Australia, these Education Acts established a fairly rigid pyramidal structure for the State control of education through civil service Departments of Education in each state. A remarkably enduring and uniform pattern emerged in which the elected State Parliament had ultimate control of education exercised through a Minister for Education. Whilst the Minister had formal authority, the real power was delegated to the civil service head of the Education Department, the Director-General of Education. The Director-General was almost invariably a

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1 They were actually independent colonies until Federation in 1901 when they became the states of the Australian Federation.

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successful career teacher turned bureaucrat, as were most of his senior head office staff. The Departments, before long, had separate divisions for Elementary, Secondary and Technical Education, but were usually housed in a single head office in the capital city of each State. All major policy decisions and functions were exercised by the Director-General or his senior staff.

Until very recently, and in most States still, the Education Department was centrally responsible for all teacher salary determinations and payments, promotions, staffing appointments and transfers between schools, curriculum, school buildings and supplies, exit examinations, etc.

As Kandel once noted, Australia's extreme degree of educational centralization was 'not blind, fortuitous and haphazard' but rather a logical outcome of its history and educational needs at the time (Beare 1987). In trying to understand the different systems of traditional educational governance which emerged in the US (local control) and Australia (centralized control) it is crucial to appreciate the sharp contrast in the conditions and predominant ideologies of early settlement in each country. In a fascinating study in which he sought to test Frederick Jackson Turner's American 'Frontier Thesis' on the early settlement of Australia, Allen (1959) highlighted some crucial differences. To grossly over-simplify, Allen noted that whereas the American continent was relatively benign to westward expansion and early settlement, Australia was harsh and inhospitable. Whereas early settlers in the US prospered relatively quickly, Australia's early settlers almost starved and were repelled by the hardship and strangeness of the antipodes. Whereas America's early settlements thrived on an ethos of self-help and voluntarism, Australia's struggling settlements were heavily dependant on government provision and control. Thus, for example, where the major services of America's expanding settlements - road, rail, telecommunication, electricity were largely provided by self-help and/or entrepreneurship, Australia's had to be provided by government. Similarly, where American communities established schools funded at grassroots by local property taxes, Australia's early attempts at voluntarism in education largely failed and settlers largely resorted to the government or organised Catholic Church for provision. The result, of course, was, that once State centralized systems were established in

Australia, schools were funded through the general state taxation system and this became a further disincentive to local involvement and control.

Growing Criticism of Centralised State Control

Whilst these highly centralised systems had served the sparsely populated Australian States well during the early years of this century in meeting such key challenges as the provision of universal free elementary education and the promotion of equality of opportunity, they were, in the view of some, becoming increasingly anachronistic by the time of the Second World War.

One of the most astute foreign commentators on Australian education ever to visit Australia was R. Freeman Butts of Teachers College, Columbia University, USA. In 1955, in a special commentary on Australian Education prepared for the Australian Council for Educational Research, Butts (1955 : 21) noted this anachronism:

> It is undoubtedly true that the Australian (education) systems were democratic in the sense that they emerged after much discussion in the parliament and after unsatisfactory trial of other methods. Many now think that the solutions which seemed to fit the situation at that time provided a scheme which has become progressively unsuitable for a democratic society as population has grown and as conditions have changed. *The time now seems ripe for a fundamental re-examination of this whole question.*

In the same critique, Butts (1955 : 16) urged Australians to consider the crucial question confronting their State Education Departments:

> Will an exclusively centralized system of decision-making ultimately serve the cause of democracy in society at large?

This question posed by Butts in 1955 has become naggingly more insistent with the passing decades. He was dismayed by the extent to which a few senior education bureaucrats in each State controlled most major policy decisions and urged that the decision-making process be opened up:

> I wonder ... whether you miss something of the vitality, initiative, creativeness and variety that would come if the doors and windows of discussion and decision were kept more open all the way up and down the educational edifice. The two-way flow of educational ideas might lead to more broadly based decisions, and therefore more democratic ones.

He went on to urge moves towards decentralization:

> I have the feeling that the time is ripe for serious long-term planning with respect to the possibilities of genuine decentralization in educational policy-making and financial support. Some regions and some communities in every State are now surely large enough and vital enough to be classified as school districts worthy of greater autonomy in the handling of their educational affairs.

Reversing the Pattern of Centralization?

It is a tribute to the durability and in-built survival mechanisms of centralized systems, that it has taken until the 1980s for any of the Australian State education systems to address these crucial philosophical and structural issues raised by Butts at the level of implementing efforts at major structural reversal!

It has been suggested by Beare (1987) that the 'watershed' for the 'reconstruction' now taking place in Australia's educational governance, occurred during the 1970s when dramatic Federal intervention in both school and tertiary sector policy severely weakened state centralized dominance of these policy arenas. The policies and finance of the new Commonwealth Schools Commission challenged the monolithic control of State Departments and gave strong encouragement to such innovations as school-based decision-making and 'devolution of responsibility' to local schools.

Thus by 1980, Harman could confidently assert:

> In recent Australian literature on educational administration (including reports of official committees of inquiry), two closely related themes stand out above all others with regard to the structure and operation of administrative systems at state or territory levels. One is the desirability of a much higher degree of decentralization or devolution in control, and the other is the need for much broader community and professional participation in policy-making and governance.

Butts's views had, by the 1980s, firmly taken root amongst many professional educators - though ironically, there was only limited evidence of grassroots pressure in the community at large for such changes.

Certainly, School Councils have, in recent years, become a constant topic of conversation amongst senior policy-makers and school principals across Australia (Beare 1987). This is the single most visible tip of the 'restructuring' movement. In the Australian Capital Territory since the mid 1970s each School has had a School Board; in Tasmania and South Australia, low key or moribund School Councils have reportedly been reinvigorated by additional budget powers; the Northern Territory has developed School Councils of a kind and New South Wales and Queensland are exploring the possibilities of School Councils.

However, perhaps it is in Victoria and Western Australia that the most potentially far-reaching efforts at restructuring, decentralization and development of School Councils is underway. Unfortunately, though, these developments are so recent that it is impossible to give a definitive answer to the symposium question 'Can Schools be Self-Governing?' By way of an answer, let me first briefly report something of what has transpired in each of these two States and then seek to draw some tentative conclusions.

Victorian Efforts to Restructure

Following more than a century of remarkably stable centralized educational administration, Victoria has, in the past decade, undergone a virtual orgy of restructuring. In the space of less than ten years it has experienced at least three separate waves of restructuring.

Between 1979-1982, the conservative Liberal-National Party Government under an innovative Education Minister, Alan Hunt, committed itself to greater devolution of administration. It undertook a series of reviews of the centralised Department (including an unprecedented review by P.A. Management Consultants) culminating in a series of structural reforms which: abolished the divisional structure of Primary, Secondary, Technical and replaced it with a functional structure at the centre; deposed the Director-General; and created 12 Regions with very senior appointees as Regional Directors. Although it was proposed to give considerable power to School Councils, there was considerable opposition to this from the Teachers Union and the central administrators, and little happened. It proved remarkably difficult to reduce the power and influence of the 'centre'. In March 1982, a new Victorian Labor Government was elected, promising to replace the 'token' devolutionary reforms of its predecessors with a thoroughly decentralized system with much stronger emphasis on the Regions and School Councils.

A State Board of Education was established to provide a strong alternative non-Departmental source of advice to the Minister and so counter the power of the centre. The function of Regional Boards was to be reversed so that rather than being instruments of the 'centre' 'bringing centrally determined programs and services closer to the schools', they were, instead, to become much more 'responsive to the needs of the schools', with their major role being that of 'servicing and assisting schools'. (Ministerial Papers No. 5, 1984)

Within a framework of centrally determined state-wide social and educational goals, the School Councils were given major new powers via legislation in 1984. The legislation gave them the potential for a central

role in determining and implementing School Policy through their powers to: develop School Improvement Plans; determine curriculum objectives and the use of school resources; and to appoint the Principal.

In the euphoria of those early days of the Victorian Labor Government, the Minister, Robert Fordham, declared (Ministerial Paper 4: 1983):

> The Government is confident that School Councils, principals and teachers will see this change as providing an historic opportunity for enhanced professional effectiveness; providing shorter lines of communication; real local responsibility and accountability; and greater educational effectiveness through parent and community support, both psychological and material, for agreed policies.

The Centre Strikes Back

According to my sources, there has been a 'sea-change' in perspective and expectations since the heady days of 1983-4. As one informant put it, 'The World has been turned upside down'! Deeply influenced by budgetary restraint and the 'corporate management and efficiency' movement which has swept the Australian public sector in recent years, the Victorian Government - and probably many voters - are now opposed to School Based Curriculum Development and School Improvement Plans. Such notions are now apparently regarded by most of those in power as 'romantic nonsense' and the original influential supporters of these democratic developments have been either marginalised or won over to the new Corporate Management philosophy.

In a classic 'central bureaucracy strikes back' power play, a third wave of restructuring has recently occurred in Victorian Education. A more management-oriented Education Minister, Ian Cathie, replaced Fordham. Critical of the Ministerial Papers philosophy and administrative confusion, Cathie established a Head Office Restructures Group to review administrative structures. Strongly influenced by thinking in the Department of Budget and Management and the Public Service Board, the review succesfully recommended the implementation of a Corporate

Management Structure. Under the Corporate Management Structure, direct line-staff authority has been re-imposed so that contrary to the Schools Council legislation, Principals are no longer accountable to school Councils but rather are responsible to the Regional Directors and the Centre. As one informant put it:

> Corporate Management has run rampant and is rolling back all the gains of the early '80s. The 12 Regional Boards have been reduced to 8 and are assisting in the re-assertion of Central control. They are firmly back in the control of the Centre and may eventually be abolished. The State Board has been downgraded, reporting to the Corporate Management Group but not being represented on it.

The School Improvement Plan has apparently been 'transformed' into a formalised process associated with Programme Budgeting and centralised monitoring of standards.

School Councils

The success of School Councils has been mixed. Perhaps the greatest success story has been that of local appointment of Principals. Apparently 60-70% of Councils have opted for local selection rather than central selection and this has, by and large, worked fairly well. There have been numerous success stories of relatively young and dynamic Principals being appointed and winning strong support in their School communities for their positive leadership. Ironically, such appointees may be the ones who will help School Councils survive - for School Councils, by and large, have been opposed to the re-assertion of central control and some of these locally appointed 'new breed' Principals have been prepared to resist central control. Understandably, though, most Principals are confused, for in the new Corporate Management Structure their first loyalty is supposed to be to the Centre, not, as before, to the School Council.

Another worrying trend, I am told, is that on School Councils the Parent/Community representatives tend to be 'marginalised' in the

decision-making process by the sophisticated politicking and withholding of information by the Regional reprsentatives and Teachers Union representatives - both of which groups have privileged access to the Centre.

To summarise, then, in Victoria to date, the progress towards self-government in schools over the last decade has been characterised by dramatic rhetoric and re-structuring, but relatively modest gains at grassroots so far. Particularly ominous has been the recent reassertion of greater central control via the new Corporate Management structure.

Western Australian Restructing in its Infancy

In Western Australia, the moves towards devolution of power are extremely recent. In 1980, I described Western Australia's State education system as perhaps the most centralized in Australia (Smart and Alderson 1980). In those days virtually all major policy decisions were taken by the Director-General, ratified by the Minister, and relayed to Principals. Very few Schools had School Councils. In 1983, however, the reformist Burke Labor Government came to power on an electoral promise of a wide-ranging review of education. That review recommended extensive reforms to education, including the provision of greater community participation in school decision-making (Beazley : 1984).

The review also recommended, but did not undertake, a separate review of the education department's highly centralized structure. Endorsing the vogue throughout Australia in recent years, the Burke Government in 1985 had commenced, through its Public Service Board and Department of Budget Management, a routine series of 'Functional Reviews' of Government Departments and Authorities. During 1986, the WA Government's Functional Review Committee routinely reviewed the education portfolio following a request from the actively reformist Minister for Education, Bob Pearce, for advice as to how 'to streamline the structure of the Education Department and to improve co-ordination and resource management across the portfolio' (Functional Review 1986). It

is clear from the Committee's confidential report that the Review was intended to produce budgetary reductions as well as improve administrative efficiency.

The Review Committee's Report was repackaged by the astute Minister for Education and his senior staff into a glossy public document entitled *Better Schools in Western Australia : A Programme for Improvement* and 'sold' to the community through a slick public relations exercise in late 1986. Endorsing the language of corporate management and using a rationale of decentralization, economy, self-determining schools and community participation, the Minister proposed a radical restructuring of the education portfolio.

The cumbersome Education Department was to be replaced by a sleeker Ministry of Education and the Director-General by a 'Chief Executive Officer'. The Ministry was to comprise 3 Divisions: Schools, Policy and Resources, and Technical and Further Education. Running through the document is a clear corporate management philosophy, which has since been implemented.

A clear signal that the Minister wished to reverse the patterns of control was given in his rationale statement:

> **Whereas once it was believed that a good system creates good schools, it is now recognised that good schools create a good system ...** The Education Department has been involved in the devolution of responsibility to schools and this process needs to be completed.

School Districts were to be the new structure for provision of a decentralised network of services, replacing the old regions. The Minister clearly meant business. During 1987 there was a complete 'spill' of over 1,000 positions in the central office and in the ensuing corporate re-structure, more than 150 staff were retrenched or transferred to schools and District offices. It is conceivable that up to another 200 'Centre' positions will be carved out through attrition and continued restructuring.

During 1988 all Schools are adopting the 'Better Schools' recommendations of working towards the creation of 'school-based

decision-making groups' and the preparation of school development plans.

No specific structure has been proposed for school based decision-making groups, though each school will be expected to have some such formal body by 1989. Such bodies may become incorporated if they wish and will be responsible for the development of the school development plan, though they will not be responsible for appointment of staff which will continue to be done centrally. In order to promote these new developments, District Superintendents and their support staffs are acting as consultants.

During 1988, the central office of the Ministry will be providing a range of support for schools to permit the development of these two key objectives. Support will include:

- grants to all schools for school development purposes;
- additional administrative support staff;
- central and district consultants who can assist schools with the school development processes;
- professional development for school staff and community members of school councils;
- printed support material.

Clearly then, it is very early days in Western Australia for local school governance. Perhaps the most positive feature of WA's reforms to date is that the Government has adopted the *Better Schools* recommendations *in toto* and so the whole concept is still internally consistent and not confused by compromises and continual tampering as in Victoria.

Unquestionably, the eyes of the rest of Australia are very much on Victoria and WA as they grapple with the problems of attempting to make School Councils and genuine decentralization a reality.

Conclusion

Can Public Schools be Self-Governing in Australia?

Clearly the extremely brief period of experimentation and the limited experience of two States in Australia makes it impossible to respond confidently in either the affirmative or the negative at this point in time. Nevertheless some general observations are appropriate:

Australia's entrenched pattern of centralised governance of education poses considerable problems for those desiring serious decentralization. Over a century of virtual active State discouragement of local involvement in educational policy has left a legacy of community and parental inexperience and feelings of inadequacy.

Whilst there has been a strong trend towards advocacy of greater community and local participation in school governance, the advocacy has come largely from politians, professional administrators and academics rather than from teachers and parents at the grassroots.

To date, it has been reformist ALP Governments in Victoria and WA which have attempted to introduce greater local governance. In both these cases, it is difficult to disentangle the motives for such reform. Whilst much of it clearly springs from a commitment to democratic principles, there is no doubt that the quest for budgetary reductions and efficiency have been sources of mixed motivation. So far, the achievement of reform has been largely at the level of implementation of structural changes which may make effective school governance a reality in the long run.

Experience to date would suggest that the achievement of thorough-going self government in Schools in Australia is likely to be a long evolutionary process and one in which the risks of drift back towards centralized control are likely to be ever-present. It is likely that in the Australian context we will have to strike a delicate balance between centralized and local control. The experimentation with regions and districts to date has been largely disappointing. The absence of corresponding local

government regions and districts for other human services has meant that these structures often seem artificial and lack community identity.

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